



# The Sacramento Bee

## **Janis R. Hirohama: 'Hybrid democracy' hamstrings state**

By Janis R. Hirohama - Special To The Bee

News about the struggle over state water bonds, the state treasurer's recent report on the affordability of the state debt and a new book from the Public Policy Institute of California highlight serious questions about California's continuing problems with ballot initiatives and budgets.

The PPIC book, "The Coming Age of Direct Democracy," suggests that California has moved to a "hybrid democracy" in which voters set policy by initiatives, and legislators and governors must learn to reach bipartisan consensus to craft proposals on complicated subjects that can be taken to the voters.

The League of Women Voters of California supports representative democracy, with our elected representatives working together to address public issues and facing the voters' judgment on what they have done. This idea has been seriously eroded by the requirement that both the state budget and taxes garner a two-thirds vote for passage. The votes of those citizens who elect a one-third minority of the Legislature are thus worth twice as much as the votes of citizens who vote for members of the majority.

Under the two-thirds requirement, the Legislature has been unable to raise revenues even for services that the public expects to have, let alone for new projects needed to keep our infrastructure and economy in good working order.

Is resorting to the ballot the solution? Not in our opinion. Ballot measures are by their nature inflexible and, if they address the question of where the money will come from at all, usually promise that for most voters it will be from "someone else." Campaigns for bond measures advertise insistently that passing a bond measure does not require any new taxes, and the possibility of user fees never figures prominently in those campaigns.

The league has studied both state finance and initiatives for many years. We support ballot measures as a "safety valve" when the Legislature has clearly and persistently failed to do the people's business. However, most ballot measures now come from well-financed special interests with little regard for the state budget consequences. When proponents do include new revenues, they typically require that the funds be used only to finance their measure, and they make the measure nearly impossible to amend.

At this point, by passing ballot measures voters have mandated how they want most of the general fund money spent. Proposition 98 alone requires that almost half of the general fund go

to education. Proposition 98 money and debt service payments are constitutionally required to be paid ahead of any other costs.

Both the Department of Finance and the Legislative Analyst's Office predict significant revenue shortfalls in the coming year and a growing budget deficit going into next year's budget battles.

Can we continue to run the state with a random mix of ballot measures and a state government that is expected to operate under them without authority to make changes when the mix doesn't work? Will California voters start looking at where the "hybrid democracy" of the ballot box has gotten us? Or will we simply continue to hamstring our elected representatives, blame them for a lack of viable solutions and enact more quick fixes?

The treasurer's report points out that our infrastructure is decaying and was never planned to serve our expected population growth. The public seems open to investing in needed improvements, and the Legislature and governor agree on the needs, if not the details. The report suggests a number of changes on both the revenue and expenditure side that could close the gap over the next few years.

It is time for a broader public conversation that is not limited to raising taxes or cutting programs. Let's begin with a dialogue about our priorities for California and then consider the fairest way to pay for them.